

BY STEVE ISRAEL.

*Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) is a member of the House Armed Services Committee.*

The world was buffeted this week by reports that Iran had enriched uranium, while the Pentagon was developing military plans to respond. I have watched this crisis from two vantage points.

First, from my seat on the House Armed Services Committee, where I agree with officials that Iran simply cannot continue any program that leads to nuclear weapons.

Second, from a seat I recently occupied at a private lunch with Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Javad Zarif, Iran's ambassador to the United Nations. We ate in a dining room decorated, incongruously, with artwork by the Jewish artist Marc Chagal, whose paintings also hang in the Israeli Knesset.

The food was abundant, but the message was clear: Iran would not end its nuclear program, had no fear of U.S. military action and was unconcerned by its growing isolation in the world.

Are we on a collision course? Is a military strike our only option? The fact is that our response in Iran is like a Rubik's Cube: Every move we make presents seemingly unsolvable complications elsewhere.

Start with Iraq. Any pressure we place on Iran - whether diplomatic, economic or military - will likely result in Tehran's using its considerable influence in Iraq to incite more violence against our troops. A diplomatic or economic solution by the United Nations Security Council? Since 2000, 40 percent of the world's increased demand for oil has come from China alone, and 12 percent of China's oil imports come from Iran. China, of course, has veto power on the UN Security Council.

Some have suggested that we seek an accommodation, perhaps a formal accord promising nonbelligerence. Others have proposed allowing Iran to develop a slow, incremental civilian nuclear research program in exchange for intrusive, verifiable International Atomic Energy Agency inspections.

Although we should flesh out the details of these ideas, I am skeptical that adequate safeguards can be developed. I am particularly concerned that a slow and incremental nuclear program in Iran will lead to a slow and incremental nuclear program in Saudi Arabia, then Egypt, then Syria and proliferate throughout the world. Other nonmilitary options - including covert activities to disrupt Iranian centrifuges and boycotts by nuclear suppliers - are similarly problematic.

This leads us to the military options. All we need to do is look at Iraq to understand the difficulties of a military response in Iran. In fact, during an unofficial war game on Iran, one former National Security Council official said, "Compared with Iraq, Iran has three times the population, four times the land area and five times the problems."

Some suggest precision strikes at Iran's nuclear facilities. But Iran has protected its facilities by burying them deep underground and dispersing them widely. There may be hundreds of targets, and if we miss a few important ones, Iran will likely retaliate with 1,200- mile-range missiles.

Additionally, virtually every military tool at our disposal - from limited and surgical to a major land war aimed at regime change - is affected by oil. Iran could blockade the Straits of Hormuz and choke the supply of oil necessary to keep the lights on in the Pentagon and the tanks filled in our fighter jets, and double the price of U.S. fuel.

Still, there is one option to consider before resorting to war. Iran may be a major exporter of oil, but it imports 40 percent of its gasoline because it has a limited refining capacity. And like us, its population is sensitive to the price of gas in an uncertain economy.

If diplomatic, economic and other tools don't work in dissuading the Iranian regime from its nuclear ambitions, reducing the amount of gas that goes into Iran may. Doing so would dramatically increase the cost of gasoline in Iran and put political pressure on the government to rethink its nuclear program and isolation in the world. A global commitment to keeping gas out of Iran is more effective and manageable than keeping oil in.

I believe strongly that the most effective and least risky approach will be sustained diplomatic pressure on Tehran. But if all these tools truly fail, a gas blockade is far better than the options that occupy the extremes: Iran with a nuclear bomb or U.S. combat operations in yet another Mideast country. Our military planners should be considering it carefully. We have learned in Iraq that a military mission that looks easy to accomplish can be exceedingly difficult to maintain.